

The Radical Way_ Shifting the Social Paradigm

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'Shifting a paradigm is not an abstract phrase you can wield in a lecture hall or a workshop but something that happens concretely, in the depth of yourself, in your relationships, in the real world'.

Charlotte du Cann, The Dark Mountain Project

'What if this was the start for seeding, listening, sensing, an imagination infrastructure for communities across the UK'

Cassie Robinson, Emerging Futures Fund

'Leap and the net will appear'

Julia Cameron, The Artists' Way

1. Setting Out

In 2018 I wrote a book: [Radical Help](#). Radical Help tells the story of a decade long experiment to re-design welfare systems. It describes why the challenges of this century require a new set of social systems; it describes what these systems might look like – the underlying principles and examples of the systems in operation; and it describes how we might get there - the methods and processes through which we designed the new and which others could emulate to grow a 21st century welfare state.

The demand for the book nationally and internationally exceeded all expectations. The vision and the stories within Radical Help have resonated with the general public and with leaders within the state and within communities. In response I have received thousands of requests for help– for tools, for advice on how to get started, for support – more invitations for coffee than a human life could encompass.

It appears there is a widespread desire to bring about the change described: to create new systems that foster capability and move away from needs based/crisis interventions. There is also a frank acknowledgement that a great deal of help is required if this desire for change is to move from something which is spoken about to committed action.

How to respond? Working today out of a tiny studio in a car park in Peckham, South London I have responded as best as I have been able to the still growing requests for help, to visit, to talk.¹ It has been a privilege to visit and learn from others in Britain, Europe and beyond. I have seen work with huge potential but I have also heard over and over again the

¹ The work described in Radical Help was designed and supported by a social enterprise I founded in 2005: Participle. Participle is no more. And, proud as I am of the work this small organisation achieved, I have no wish to replicate Participle today. I believe the skills we were able to grow and develop in our small team in South London must now be grown across the nation, in all localities. I also know that the system changing work described takes years, perhaps decades and needs sight of secure funding. Participle raised £14 million over 10 years. Each of our experiments cost in the region of £1 million a sum which enabled us to work across systems, prototype at scale and seed alternative models that had a robust chance of taking root. The models we developed saved money but space needed to be created in the system initially for the work to be designed and nurtured. Raising this money in small stages as I did for 10 years is unsustainable mentally, physically and emotionally.

frustrations of those who acknowledge that their work is 'stuck', without the supporting cultures, investment and infrastructure it would need to spread and transform. There is community energy but health systems, employment systems, social work cultures, care services and so on have remained stubborn and hard to change much to the frustration of many who work within these outmoded institutions. Moreover social 'innovation' has been de-coupled from wider questions of economy and ecology limiting any transformative potential.

In 2020 the National Lottery Community Fund was considering a set of closely connected questions recognising that pioneering work emerging in different parts of the UK is fragile and dependent on a small number of people working against the odds. In response the Community Fund were asking questions about the potential for new funding models. The Community Fund were specifically recognising and thinking about the relationship between communities and the local state, given their learning that funding communities alone does not lead to transformation.

The creation of the [Emerging Futures Fund](#), led by [Cassie Robinson](#), opened a new point of departure. In recognition that both new work and new ways of working are required in an 'emerging future', the fund was interested in new narratives, new practices, and seeding transformative ideas. The focus of the Emerging Futures Fund was *enquiry*: asking good questions as opposed to rushing to solutions. This was fertile soil for a project I called the Radical Way – an enquiry into the collaborative processes and paths that are needed for those who are seeking to implement the capability-based flourishing described in Radical Help. A small grant has allowed for a series of conversations with engaged leaders, into the nature of our current stasis – where are we stuck – and what is needed to grow?

2. The Project

In his study of state power, *The Magic Of The State*, the anthropologist Michael Taussig writes about 'pilgrimage as method', a way of hearing official and unofficial voices, a mode of enquiry that allows us to witness and absorb, rather than explain. This way of working is one I have adopted over decades, where possible starting my work by living within and alongside communities and institutions, seeking primarily to observe, to simply tune in and see what emerges.

Working almost exclusively with those who have in one way or another asked for my help with the implementation of Radical Help, I have had a series of conversations with Local Authority Chief Executives and with leading practitioners in the innovation field. (I have occasionally cited the words of these participants verbatim in italics in the text below).

Given the context of the pandemic these conversations have been virtual. Zoom offers a very different form of tonal frequency: silences are harder, the signals of body language are less perceptible, chance encounters and observations are removed. At the same time, the pandemic has made the fault-lines in existing forms of social provision acutely visible and, despite the pressures on public sector leaders and communities, many want to think and talk about what could be different.

The starting point for each conversation has been a question about what is needed now to address the deep social challenges we face - but the conversations have been loose in form, following the spirit and energy of the participant. Many of those I have been able to speak with are prototyping new ways of working in real time. The pandemic has presented the local state with an opportunity '*we have taken off our lanyards...*' There is a sense that no-one is looking, most of all that '*the vice like grip*' of the regulators has been loosened and that things long dreamt of can be tried. There is a widely shared commitment/concern to ensure things don't go back.

These initial conversations with Chief Executives have been supplemented by further conversations Cath Dillon has led with service leaders in different regions. Together we have been able to consider what we have heard. We have been able to think about the conversations in the light of our shared experience at Participle and our current work: in Cath's case as the Head of Innovation Projects at the [Innovation Unit](#), with strong relationships to an extensive group of local authorities. We have been asking what help is needed now for those leaders – still a small group – who are committed to bringing about systemic social change in the places they live and work.

3. In A Shifting Context

In Radical Help I set out the reasons why we need to think again: why improving our current social systems is no longer enough:

- (1) We face new problems that are different in nature: from the ecological crisis (of which the pandemic is part) to deep demographic shifts. Addressing our challenges requires deep participation and new horizontal bonds but we are operating within vertically integrated institutions designed to keep people out;
- (2) A new context: the welfare state operates as if the context has not radically shifted since the 1950s but the reality is that we have different family structures, a different economy and new mindsets and dreams;
- (3) Entrenched inequalities that are both material and relational have deepened in recent decades and have not been addressed by 20th century welfare systems.

The current moment is one of [radical uncertainty](#) (Tuckett). The systemic shifts and crises that surround us are wide and deep, disabling our inherited methods of planning, leading, innovating, operating, and budgeting, all of which are based on the management of risk in perceived stable systems. Risk frameworks suggest that we know what the variables are or might be and we can plan forward mitigating the chance of future failure. Radical uncertainty acknowledges that current systems and approaches no longer work and that future solutions are uncertain, complex and difficult, dooming standard top-down interventions and innovations. Thinking in terms of radical uncertainty, opens up new possibilities if we have the courage to work in new collaborations, with new methods and to remain open to a future which is still emergent.

Considering the Radical Way within this bigger context, our enquiry has centred on four themes and their inter-relationships:

- **community energy:** in many parts of the UK new social models are growing from the grassroots and there is renewed policy interest in community development approaches;
- **fragility within the local state:** a decade of austerity has severely limited the reach and possibility of local state power. A less certain state is interested in the possibility of a new relationship with their communities;
- **narrowing of the innovation landscape:** related in part to the effects of austerity and the continuing encroachment of a market philosophy;
- tying communities and state leaders together in a complex relationship to established ideas of innovation there is a **growing interest in relational social change.**

Such a framing is not of course comprehensive and in particular it leaves out the role of central government and what many perceive to be a new centralising ‘command’ tendency which will exert effects at all levels. But this paper – and our enquiry - is about local place. We consider the inter-relationship and possibilities of the first four factors: the community turn; the fragile but experimenting local state; the future of innovation and a growing interest in relational (capability based) change.

4. The Community Turn

Place based, community work has a new energy across Britain. It is not of course that community work ever went away ([Eileen Conn](#)). And yet something is different. Communities have been developing new approaches to stubborn social problems (for example the work of [Poverty/Truth in Morecambe Bay](#), the work of [Tessy Britton](#) at Participatory City in Barking and Dagenham, the agitation of the [Black Lives Matter](#) movement); they have been experimenting with new forms of democracy (for example the takeover of institutions by [Flat Pack Democracy](#)) and they have been interrogating a market led economic orthodoxy through both policy intervention and market disruptions (for example the [Creative Economist](#), Liverpool) and the creation of new forms of locally owned business (such as the [Transition movement](#), the [Onion collective](#)).

A renewed community focus is partly a product of necessity. As public budgets have hollowed out the community has stepped forward keeping local libraries and swimming pools open, providing food and shelter. Many warn against the community turn for precisely this reason ([Neil McInroy](#)) arguing that a virtue should not be made out of the politics of austerity and that we should not slip back into notions of a Big Society which means in reality that those who are most vulnerable are left to fend for themselves with least resources.

Such warnings must be heeded. But something else is happening here too. There has been a renewed realisation that locally based work makes more of a difference. The projects referred to above and many more show a creative emergence: they demonstrate the power and potential of people to decide, to create and invent social solutions in new ways that respond to the lived realities of people in a particular place.

It is important to remember that William Beveridge, the architect of the welfare state himself believed in community power and feared that his state solutions were limiting local relationships and creativity (Beveridge 3.0). Whilst we could argue that today, after a decade of austerity, we need more investment in new forms of welfare, we can also recognise – just as Beveridge did -that community imagination and energy is currently limited by the head winds of state power and in particular technocratic services, which are vertically organised and fail to connect to the possibility of the horizontally organised community response.

What is the community?

'Government uses the word community to describe poor people. Describing poverty in this way attaches a warm feeling to place.'

'A community is a group of people who share an identity-forming narrative... a group of people who share a story that is so important to them that it defines an aspect of who they are.'

'This is different from the set of people who live in a place, or have a shared interest. A group of people waiting at a bus stop have a shared interest, but they are not a community. (Unless they've been waiting for a really long time...)'

[[Toby Lowe](#)]

'By community we mean any network of individuals collaborating more or less formally to achieve a shared, socially beneficial goal.'

[[New Local](#), who in contrast describe a community as a morally, positive interest group]

In the context of this work, I use community to describe those who live in a place and share common bonds of fate ([Margaret Levi](#)), through their spatial proximity, and who may be to a greater or lesser extent organised. There is usually an implicit understanding in any locality, that individuals belong to more than one community and that interests between these communities may at times be in competition.

5. The Fragile State

'the state has become so nervous'

'we hide behind regulation – the 'right' decision is made, rather than the best decision but even with children [i.e. children's services] we could find our way round most regulation if we wanted.

'local government, the NHS, they are unravelling with despair'

As communities have seemed to glow, radiating possibility, the local state has receded from view. It's a recession that has become notable with recent excitement around community work but it started much earlier, not with austerity, but with the Conservative governments

of Margaret Thatcher. The marketisation of the services that the state had for so long delivered: the relentless promotion of contracting out, commissioning and the use of external consultants for strategy and advisory work has hollowed out skills and local relationships.

New Labour also played its part, supporting and extending the reach of the market through subtle changes in language, performance management and other neo-liberal reforms.² The politics of austerity which followed under David Cameron's government, whereby the local state saw its budgets cut by up to 40 % only added fuel to the flames. Poverty and social need grew in the form of hunger, mental illness and despair and the local state found itself caught in a vortex: more to do, less resource and – due to the constant cycles of redundancy and organisational reform caused by austerity – very little time to concentrate.

In some places local leaders reacted in radical and innovative ways (I refer to examples below). In others places confidence ebbed away. Increasingly aware of community power there was a growing urge – often amongst those most attuned to the need for change - to step back. [The New Community Paradigm](#) recently published by the New Local Government Network (an organisation of local government leaders) now called simply New Local speaks to the heart of this dilemma. New Local identify the root of the problem as; 'reducing rising demand' for public services and argue that communities – closer to the problem – have the knowledge and expertise to address this problem.

Putting to one side for a moment the question as to whether this is in fact the right diagnosis of the problem, the switch between state and community power is striking and has been likened by [Cormac Russell](#) to a hydraulic pump: two competing vertical sectors re-calibrating as one takes the energy and the pressure from the other. Russell's [work](#) describes the de facto situation – one which he welcomes since he believes that communities do indeed have the assets to solve their own problems and it is time for their 'pressure' to rise.

But must it always be a zero-sum game, a competition? The premise of this exploration is a little different. We can see from history that at moments of paradigm shift a broad range of actors (business, civil society, intellectuals and the state) are called on to play new roles. These new roles and partnerships are critical to the formation of a social settlement that can address the social challenges of a particular era such as the deep challenges of transition we face today.³

Seen in this light therefore the question is not whether the local state should or could cede more power to the community. Neither can solve our problems alone. The question is what new, emergent roles should each play in order to address our imaginative, social and economic challenges? What is the new *relationship* required between the state and our communities?

² New Labour for example abandoned the formal use of the term welfare state in favour of public services – whose 'good' users were pitted against professionals on the one hand and feckless benefit recipients on the other (Nick Timmins).

³ I discuss the roles of these four sectors within the context of the current transition (social, techno-economic and ecological) here https://bit.ly/Welfare5_0

The Radical Way is an enquiry that is focused on the state and in particular the role of statutory services within this dynamic. And it is clear that the tools and the apparatus of the state are currently not adequate to the reimagining and designing that the state needs to do. This is a critical challenge – to some extent all other actors are dependent on the state for a signalling of direction, a laying out of the framework and yet the state is trying to do 21st century work in 20th century clothing.

The Local State is not a cohesive culture and the purchase of a Chief Executive within their Local Authority was seen by many interviewees as tenuous. *Chief Executives are less brave, there's been a dilution of power in local government.* As one participant described, there is an opening moment in the chance to build a top team. Beyond this, working in a world of tightened budgets and the pressures of looming bankruptcy, it's about relationships, persuasion and keeping focused.

[New Power](#) (Heimans and Timms) described in 2014 the way in which power is shifting in response to the paradigm changes described above. Old power is static, formalised within hierarchical institutions and an individual's position within them. New power is conceived of as flow: the ability to bind many people and organisations to a common cause. Heimans and Timms take pains to point out that one power is not necessarily more desirable than another but that understanding what is to hand and can be used when, is fundamental to effecting change.

In my conversations I noted a fundamental divide between leaders who expressed frustration at their inability to get those around them to make the change they saw as necessary and those able to reach over these redundant levers and hierarchies.

[Donna Hall](#), the former chief executive of Wigan and the creator, with Wigan's Leader [Lord Peter Smith](#), of the [Wigan Deal](#), exemplifies New Power in a local government setting. Faced with austerity in 2010 and the impossibility of continuing business as usual, Donna worked across and over formal hierarchies and institutional boundaries to construct a story of a new partnership between people and government: in this partnership communities would be handed their assets – buildings and budgets -in ways they could use differently and statutory services would in turn be re-configured around relationships within and between communities.⁴ This radical re-set transformed the social landscape in Wigan and is a source of inspiration for public leaders across Britain and beyond. I have brought public leaders with whom I am working in Scandinavia to Wigan on learning visits.

Donna and the Deal were frequently referenced in conversations. Many would like to emulate Donna and the Deal but Donna's form of leadership appears as something they cannot fathom. It is as if, to borrow an analogy from Philip Pullman's *Dark Materials*, that the worlds of new and old power are separated in a way that most cannot see or cross between. With the corrosion of the possibilities of old power within the local state for many

⁴ To the outsider this can look like community work because later the fundamental role played by the state is no longer visible. The Greenslate community farm for example: 6 acres in community ownership growing local food on the outskirts of Wigan is a 'community project', but this gifting of land is something developed by the local authority in partnership with the community.

it seems easier to rely on their communities rather than to imagine a new power relationship within and between the local state and communities.

New Power leaders made the following distinctions/ observations about their work:

- They [old power] steward resources and it's hard working with external funders trained to do the same (Nesta was a frequently cited example of a funding organisation that also thinks of stewardship of their resources, rather than growing local capability). Rather than build capacity their philosophy seems to be *'get worse then we will work with you'*
- They [old power] manage risk rather than work in new ways with uncertainty
- We [new power] measure to learn, not keep score
- Let's give the old a good death, to stop people hanging on.
- We need to provide infinite second chances
- Build the roles out of the work needed, not professional norms [old power]
- Work at the speed of trust [new power]

6. Farewell Innovation?

There is an innovation paradox. Innovation is today widely accepted as a constant, an expected behaviour within local places and the public sphere. More than that, a shared and sophisticated discourse around 'system change' has developed. However, whilst the talking about innovation has flourished, the practice has narrowed. Innovation is a business: funds are tight, projects are small in terms of budget, time lines and ambition. As one leading practitioner commented *'this is not whole population change, it is more like acupuncture'*.

North Yorkshire County Council's award-winning [No Wrong Door](#) exemplifies how innovation can work in this context. The approach targets a small, high risk (and high cost) cohort with a high level of complex needs, who are failed by the current system (adolescents in or on the edge of care). *No Wrong Door* replaces the current fragmented support offered by different services and professionals with a model that allows a young person to maintain a stable set of relationships whether they live at home or in care. Early evaluations have shown that this simple but effective idea saved money and improved outcomes for young people.⁵ *No Wrong Door* has since been adopted by 15 Local Authorities in England.

No Wrong Door can be seen as best practice: that is, the best innovation possible within current regulatory frameworks (such as Ofsted) and within commissioning frameworks which also govern innovation. Everyone however recognised the distance between this approach - which joins up existing services in new ways - and the system changing work described in [Radical Help](#).

In conversation most participants referred to the stubborn presence of a service mindset: *'people's desire to create new services is very hard to shift'*. We wanted to explore however whether success running an innovation project even if narrowly defined, might have an invisible impact fomenting the skills and courage to go further.

⁵https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/625366/Evaluation_of_the_No_Wrong_Door_Innovation_Programme.pdf

Our interviews revealed that leaders who had previously been involved in a range of innovation projects did not feel empowered to attempt wider system change - in large part because they simply could not imagine being able to work around and beyond the boundaries of their service and existing regulatory frameworks; *'trying to get a system to work batters you'*, *'when complexity hits the fan, a voice on your shoulder whispers what will happen when we are inspected and the whole thing falls over'*. At the same time the 'acupuncture' experience did provoke new questions about purpose; *'it radicalised me'*, *'it was like the scales falling from my eyes...I'm emboldened now.'*

What seems to be emerging after some decades of innovation practice, is the longer-term implications of working with methods, practice and a discourse rooted in a particular paradigm: that of mass production. Whilst pioneers embraced processes that initially offered a possibility to re-invent and re-imagine, it is as if the industrial roots of innovation have re-asserted themselves and the methods have scaled and become systemic *everyone has a double-diamond and carries out 'user ethnography'* without enabling the deeper change some are searching for.

This deeper change does not start with improvement of what is existing, but rather asks a bigger question about what is needed now to flourish. This is work that must grapple with power, the legacy issues of who is left out and, critically, creates a narrative that links every day practice to a transformative vision. Those who are working in this vein today are few in number but include [Tessy Britton](#) at Participatory City, [Sophia Parker](#) at Little Village and [Imandeep Kaur](#) at Civic Square. Others experimenting internationally include [Aarathi Krishnan](#) at UNDP who is asking deep questions about the legacies of race and power which remain untouched by most innovation work and [Gabriella Gomez-Mont](#) whose Laboratorio – or office for the Public Imagination - in Mexico City attempted to leap beyond notions of service to put ideas of imagination at the heart of civic life.

But in the mainstream, what started almost as a guerrilla movement has become formulaic, another strand of a needs-based welfare capitalism that can sometimes make marginal improvements but is not enabling the radical shifts seen in the first decade of the Deal, or the best of the experiments in Radical Help. Innovation is not in short enabling us to imagine what welfare systems should look like, nor is it enabling us to re-draw the relationships critical for a new social paradigm, including those between the state and the community.

7. From Need to Capability

'Radical Help has changed the common sense. It's a big achievement. But practice is stubborn.'

'We need investment to capitalise social infrastructure, not bricks and mortar. All these new institutions we are then going to have to work out a way to keep people out of!'

The hunger to do things differently, to which this exploration responds, was loud within the rhythm of the conversations with leaders. But beneath this headline declaration of intent lie very different understandings of what a commitment to such change would really involve.

Knowing where to start is complex. As one participant who works across a number of systems commented; *'People find it very hard to start. The system as a whole feels too big – everyone needs to be involved and this is too many people to get round a table. In reaction people start with where they are, it becomes a project and tinkering.'*

Tinkering feels inadequate and traditional projects do not seem the right way forward. In particular there is an increasing rejection of short term outside-led innovation projects. Several leaders described to me their frustration at constantly finding themselves chosen as pilots by London based teams who look at deprivation data and turn up announcing a small scale (50k) collaboration. There is a growing perception that such projects raise expectations locally only to leave little behind in terms of improved local conditions or capability. Two leaders told me how they had recently asked such teams to look elsewhere.

The current context also presents a direct challenge to the normative forms of centralised consultancy that have been offered to all places in recent decades. Such support is often no longer welcome and critically is not growing the skills and knowledge in place that are increasingly recognised to be core components for both the paradigm shifting work we need and the imagination infrastructure we crave. There is a challenge here because those leaders most committed to radical change have a hunger to learn and to be connected to those who have led path-breaking practice elsewhere – but this relationship needs to be brokered in a new way.

Culture change is understood as part of the picture but again, leaders in the vanguard feel frustrated: culture is not enough. For example, leaders in North Ayrshire have recently written a compelling and frank report, with the Carnegie Trust, titled [Why Kindness is Not Enough](#). In their experience, kindness did not 'cut through' in terms of changed practice: *'because of the almost universal appreciation of kindness as a personal value (undoubtedly part of its strength and appeal) the word itself brings associations that can be problematic. Unlike other approaches to describe systems change, there is a certain comfort in conversations about kindness that makes it difficult to move beyond values and attitudes towards something more structural'*.⁶

It is interesting that some of the most innovative work is coming from Scotland where a belief in the power of community is aligned with a still strong state. The work of [Katie Kelly](#) Deputy Chief Executive at East Ayrshire Council is an inspirational if rare example of an innovative re-articulation of the local state and communities.

Under the banner [Vibrant Communities](#) Katie has developed a uniquely facilitative approach to the Council's work. She has not distinguished between Council workers and service users: all are seen as part of a community with a role to play.⁷ She has used budgets to give

⁶ North Ayrshire: A Case Study on Kindness Carnegie Trust, Ben Thurman September 2020:12

⁷ It is interesting that the difference between places where state leaders live within the communities they serve (East Ayrshire, Barrow) and those where leaders live elsewhere and therefore are not part of the borough, using the same services, stopping by at the same markets etc (most London Authorities) is something

long term horizons to community initiatives and in the face of budget cuts retained skilled community workers ('the human bridges') who can support communities in the development of their work. Wherever possible [state roles have been re-purposed](#) to be at the service of families.

8. Who is ready for practice?

Conversations led us to see local places and their leaders in one of three states of readiness or action. These states are broad and overlapping but we can describe them as follows:

Group 1: Show a keen interest, are fluent in the language of innovation (may be a significant purchaser of innovation projects) but have no real grasp of what needs to be done or the full implications of a capability-based system. This group is large in number.

Group 2: Are experimenting at a small scale: they need creative, moral and financial support 'The Believing Mirror' and in particular they need resource, tactics and skills to move pilots through their systems. This group are often tired and lonely – they are in the vanguard and they are small in number.

Group 3: Have genuine ambition, understand that system change is a distinct approach (not a project or a pilot although the latter might play a role); are engaged with the philosophy behind the capability approach and are committed to place-based practice. This group needs help to get started and is also small in number.

It is important to emphasise that these groupings are loose. A Director of Service might belong in group 3 and be working to a Chief Executive in group 1. Reflecting on our conversations we decided the focus of any ongoing work and collaboration should be with groups 2 and 3. This group is small in number but genuinely committed: they have the possibility to make change that others could follow.

9. Towards a Radical Way: emerging threads

Our enquiry has revealed the following:

- (1) The state has been badly weakened by austerity (and exhausted by Covid) but it still has power, resource and creative potential;
- (2) Communities are capable, have an intuitive understanding of local possibility, a deep knowledge of place: they are creative but they also lack resource, wider connections and have a hunger for learning;
- (3) An unreformed, risk-led statutory sector presents head winds that limit the important role of communities;⁸

rarely commented on but I have noted in my pilgrimages that this is a factor which makes a significant difference to the state/community relationship and the visions and work that follow.

⁸ A good example of this might be Barrow where Love Barrow Families is locally and nationally admired but still has to work without the resources found in statutory care/family services – and has to spend a considerable amount of time undoing the work of statutory services when their actions do not serve families they know well. The statutory leadership in this case is located in offices over 80 miles away from Barrow (a 4 hour plus round trip) to Carlisle.

- (4) The challenges are too big to make this an either/ or debate: a sensing infrastructure needs everyone and in particular it needs new hybrid forms of community/state practice.

What is required are thick new horizontal systems, binding place, community and the local state together: a shared vision, new forms of practice, a philosophy that guides decision making and money.

Vision

The change we are moving towards requires developing an authentic local narrative. This narrative has to be sufficiently baggy (go bi-lingual in the *New Power Lexicon* – although probably multi-lingual) to enable all citizens of a particular place to see themselves reflected. The narrative is a constellation: it provides a shared compass point and direction of travel – it can be seen and understood from where we stand now – it is rooted in our reality – but it points to where we want to go. The Deal is an example of such a narrative – widely shared across Wigan it enabled the deep change that Donna and her colleagues brought about. A vision cannot be copied, it has to be grown in local place.

In Barrow a recent experiment with the Emergent Futures funded [New Constellation](#) team enabled a powerful vision exercise that drew in a cross section of the municipality (state, community and local business) in a deep and emergent (virtual) journey that has created a new story of what Barrow can become. This story can guide new shared work within the municipality and direct the investment that will shortly flow into Barrow.

The vision -or story - is the starting point for a re-articulation between the local state and the community: they are part of one story and from there can work forwards.

We have found that the biggest differentiator between our groups is that Groups 2 and 3 get the need for a vision - their vision might not be fully formed but there is something nascent they are working towards. Group 1 confuse business plans, innovation theory and strategy with vision.

Practice

'We all have to un-learn'

'Everyone here wants to consult, they don't know this is not engagement'

There is a big need for new forms of imaginative practice. This is tricky ground: tools are needed to get started, they are like the props in a play, giving confidence when new roles are attempted - but over-dependence on a menu or a formula just tips us backwards and is yet another veil preventing emergent new practice.

Trust in all institutions is at a low ebb. A visionary story like The Deal or Barrow's New Constellation made together has resonance but to really sing it must be made tangible through practice: new forms of doing, making and new institutional responses in the

behaviour of social workers, school leaders and public officials. In the Radical Way purpose is deduced from behaviour, not from stated goals or rhetoric.

We have already discussed the challenges many find in knowing where to start. Choosing a place that has local urgency and importance is critical. Equally important is intervening in such a way that the statutory system is opened up to further possibilities of change – that is the system itself is disrupted in a way which creates the possibility for others to enter and grow/contribute to a new eco-system.⁹

This work requires the participation of a broad team including those leaders who hold responsibility for those parts of the current system that are in question and a diverse section of the community, all of whose voices must carry weight despite their very different positions of power within the hierarchy. Carrying out this work in such a way that deep participation is enabled and something new is created requires skills for facilitation and making that do not currently exist in many places. One immediate injection of capacity could come through the re-purposing and decentralising of existing innovation institutions.

Philosophy

'Strategy plans are two a penny. We need the philosophy – it allows you to move forward, it gives you the legitimacy when times are tough'.

Changing behaviours, re-inventing systems, disrupting existing power balances: these are processes that require a clear and guiding philosophy if we are not to get lost along the way. Without a new articulation of what matters systems will tend to revert and if the new philosophy is too general 'being kind' it won't slice through. The philosophy is our true North – it will pick us up when the going is tough and remind us of what matters when we lose the way.

At the heart of the Radical Way is a commitment to nurturing the capabilities of people and place. The capability approach - developed by the Nobel economist [Amartya Sen](#) and the philosopher [Martha Nussbaum](#) – is *developmental*: it does not attempt to fix, to meet needs or deliver an outcome. It asks a question: what can I really be and do? This apparently simple question contains multitudes: it brings into focus the material – the opportunities in a place and who has access, it brings into focus our inner selves - what we might have been told for example is our place. Power comes into stark relief and granular stories matter as the basis of making change

Martha Nussbaum calls the capability framework a counter theory, because it is disruptive. The approach to social change which underpins our social institutions today: including funding organisations, the third sector, the services of the welfare state and some community work, is to see people as dependent and in need, according to their biases and in response try to give something and to manage that need. The capability approach turns this culture on its head: a capability cannot be given or done to you or to me. Each of us can develop with support.

⁹ In Part III of Radical Help describes how Participle went about this work and the writings of Donella Meadows (2009) are a core text here.

Money

There is not enough money. This creates three core pressures: services can no longer cope with those waiting for support who are often in increasingly desperate situations; leadership is unstable— daily pressures lead to staff rotation in a way that makes imagination almost impossible (this was raised in many conversations and is given attention in Radical Help); limited or no capacity to create anything new – this requires slack in the system.

Funding is needed in place, at significant levels (£ millions) with decent time horizons (5 to 10 years). Funding needs to be attached to a vision and a philosophy not to pre-determined outputs and monitored through learning relationships rather than reports.

The question that emerges is: what would it take to capitalise local places? Just as we understand that local economies need a local infrastructure (local development banks, professional organisations, physical infrastructure) so thriving communities need the same. Currently the ability to dream and create has been stifled by a lack of access to capital, learning and wider resource. Competition for the funds available stunt relationships and potential as all sides contort themselves into whatever shape philanthropists or central government departments deem currently fashionable as they compete against others within their community.

Capitalising places through new mutual structures would underpin a radical shift in the relationship between the local state and the community, rupturing current dependencies that are rooted in the flow of money. The Deal returned assets and budgets to communities. We could ask how would family support, older care, economic innovation, public places and more look like if capital of all forms was mutualised. This is a critical space where more imagination is needed.

10. Still on the Way...

*'I'm seeking the company of others who can work with this'
'to fan the flames and build a movement with potential'*

In March 2021 a small group (14) of those who had been involved in the wider enquiry came together for an afternoon's conversation: a discussion of this paper and the challenges raised. Our time together reinforced a sense of how little time/space there is for public sector leaders in particular to reflect and imagine and how critical such time/space is for enabling the change so many seek. The enquiry also forged a set of important new relationships and connections for those who are raising the bar and seeking ways to bring capability-based change into being. Addressing the challenges of vision; philosophy, practice and money are urgent. Those on this path need much, much more support: emotional, financial, intellectual and institutional if we are to really see the change we imagine.

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Links to Activists and Thought Leaders

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Erika Rushton <https://www.baltic-creative.com/about/team/erika-rushton/>

Flatpack Democracy <https://www.flatpackdemocracy.co.uk>

Dark Mountain Project <https://dark-mountain.net>

Transition <https://transitionnetwork.org>

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